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REAGAN ADMINISTRATION INFORMATION POLICIES

All Presidents have shown a desire to restrict access to information. But many press groups insist that Ronald Reagan and his administration have been unusually active in this area. And concern is growing about the implications of another term of restrictive policies.

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The Justice Department seeks to weaken the Freedom of Information Act.

The Defense Department clamps a lid on release of unclassified information.

The CIA prepares legislation to criminalize the disclosure of classified information to reporters.

The President directs more than 100,000 federal workers to sign lifetime censorship contracts.

The press is excluded from on-the-scene coverage of U.S. troops landing on Grenada.

What do they add up to?

"All in all, I think we are faced with an administration that is quite uncomfortable with a free flow of information," says Charles S. Rowe, editor and co-publisher of The Free Lance-Star in Fredericksburg, Va., and chairman of the First Amendment/Freedom of Information working group of the ANPA Government Affairs Committee.

Dom Bonafede, senior contributing editor of National Journal, a weekly magazine that covers the federal government, goes even farther. The administration of Ronald Reagan, the "Great Communicator," is, he says, "more repressive against the free flow of information than any other administration of recent times."

Even some of the staunchest Reagan supporters among the press are critical of the administration's information policies.

The Enterprise, a 13,000-circulation daily in Simi Valley and

Morepark, Calif., twice endorsed Ronald Reagan for President. Says Editor and Publisher Wayne Lee: "He is a hell of a lot better than Jimmy Carter was or Walter Mondale would have been." But when it comes to access to government information, Lee rates the Reagan record as "deplorable."

"And, frankly," he adds, "I don't understand it for a fellow who keeps talking about freedom and the fact that much of (this country's) freedom rests on the free access to information."

Although the press may seem to be acting in concert in criticizing the administration's information policies, not every initiative draws unanimous condemnation.

For instance, at least one press group opposed the Reagan administration's policy of notifying a business when it becomes the subject of an FOIA request; others have not. When the press was barred from coverage of the first two and a half days of the October 1983 invasion of Grenada, most news organizations protested vehemently; but some like The Richmond (Va.) Times-Dispatch sprang to the administration's defense.

In fact, there have always been some divisions in the media ranks. To cite one example: In 1974, ANPA did not join other press organizations in urging Congress to override a presidential veto of amendments to strengthen the FOIA, but instead it urged the adoption of compromise language suggested by President Gerald R. Ford.

However, among press groups today, there is widespread and growing concern about the prospect of four more years of

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